

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS**

**MOGAN CULTURAL CENTER
LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

LAOTIAN SECRET WAR EXHIBIT

**INFORMANT: CHANHMA SISOUKRAJ
INTERVIEWER: MEHMED ALI
TRANSLATER: PINKHAM BOUASRI
DATE: 2008**

**A = ALI
T = TRANSLATOR
C = CHANHMA**

Tape 08.10

Note: "T" will be used to denote Translator's voice, translating the questions asked of and the responses from the informant.

A: Okay. First, where and when were you born?

T: Monday, May (--) Oh, she doesn't know the name of the year. She tells me the name of the animal.

A: Oh, okay. Well we can figure it out. What's the animal?

T: She's eighty years old.

A: Okay, what's the animal?

T: She's going to be eighty in May, this May.

A: Okay. What's the animal?

T: Rabbit.

A: Rabbit. Okay. So we can figure out the year from that. And she's born in May. (T: Yes) You don't know the date?

T: Monday. She only know Monday. She doesn't know the date. [Retrieves ID card]

A: Okay. May 6, 1924 is listed on her ID card.

T: May 6, 1924.

A: What? Where were you born?

T: Ban Nakang, that's the village name, Ban Nakang. (A: Okay) Khammouan, the Province. And then after the war she moved to [Hmouan].

A: Okay.

T: When they live over there they go buy you know, food at Tha Khaek. It's close to Tha Khaek, that's the state. That's Province.

A: What were the names of your parents?

T: Her father's name [Chandi]. Mother's name [Cami]. Her parents' last name is [Sisalat].

A: [Sisalat], okay. So it's [Chandi] is the father. And the mother [T: Cami]. Okay. And do you remember the names of your grandparents?

T: Grandfather (--) No, she doesn't remember.

A: Any of the parents, any of the grandparents?

T: Only grandmother. Grandmother's name is [Sim], and she doesn't know her grandfather's name.

A: And that's who? Which side?

T: Her mother's side.

A: Her mother's side. So her grandmother on her mother's side name is?

T: [Sim]. And she's not sure about her grandfather's name. [Pathena] or something.

A: On her mother's side.

T: Yes, mother's side.

A: Okay. So her grandfather's name on her mother's side might be?

T: [Pathena].

A: And her grandmother on her mother's side name is?

T: [Sim]

A: Okay. Did you go to school when you were young?

T: No, she didn't go to school when she was young. When they recruit the (--) Because in Laos back then they had to go recruit people to go to school. And then she went hiding. She didn't go. She was afraid or something, and she didn't go to school. Now she regrets it.

A: What did your parents do for work?

T: Farmer. Rice farming.

A: And were your parents and grandparents from this village all the time, or did they move there at one point?

T: They lived there all the time. They didn't move.

A: So what was your first job?

T: Farming.

A: And what did you have to do as a farm, farmer?

T: The rice farming.

A: Okay.

T: They plant rice.

A: Did she have to work long hours?

T: All day, from dawn to dusk. When you wake up you go to the farm, the rice farm, and then work, and then take a break. Eat lunch, and then go work again until you know, at the end of the day, and then go home. It's hard.

A: When? How did she meet her husband?

T: The same village.

A: Was it an arranged marriage, or how did they fall in love?

T: Arranged marriage. She didn't like, she didn't want to get married. [Chuckles] And her parents make her get married.

A: Yah, and then what happened afterwards? Did she love her husband?

T: She was about seventeen, or eighteen at that time. She says she didn't want to get married she said. She [doesn't] have the love for him, we just stayed together. She gave me an example that, because she didn't like her husband, and she didn't want to get married. And the parents forced them to get married. And then one of her friends, or somebody that they have to turn their back in the wedding you know. You're supposed to sit next to each other like this, well she turned her back on him.

A: Oh, at the wedding ceremony [T: Yah, at the wedding] she turned her back on her husband to be?

T: Yah, no, somebody else, but not her though.

A: What do you mean somebody else?

T: Somebody related to her.

A: Okay, they were upset as well?

T: Yah. Even though they didn't, you know, they didn't, I mean they didn't want to get married, they still have kids together, stuff like that. So her family forced her to get married to her husband.

A: Was her husband the same (--)

T: He threatened her, or her family that if she didn't get married with him he's going to go kill himself.

A: Oh!

T: Yah, and then that's why they had to force her to get married to him.

A: Was he the same age as her?

T: He's older, five years older. Oh, he passed away already. Almost ten years now. So she came here to visit her children, and then they sponsored her to stay.

A: And then her husband died over in Laos?

T: Yah, umhm.

A: How many children did they have?

T: Twelve, nine left.

A: Okay. What was your first knowledge that there was Communist, or a war going on?

T: You know at the time they were at the war, the Communist came to the village.

A: The Communist came to the village?

T: Yah, the Communist come to the village and they were scared. And she packed her stuff and then go hide in the, in the you know, in the jungle, (A: Okay) in the mountain. She's afraid of the, you know the bomb.

A: Okay. Did (--) So she didn't know that there was such a thing as Communist until they came to the village?

T: No, she didn't know.

A: She didn't know about the war?

T: During the war, after they're hiding in the mountain, they were hiding in the mountains for about a month or two. (A: Okay) So then they're tired of waiting in there, you know, hiding there and they came back home. After they came back home and then they moved the Tha Khaek.

A: Okay. All right.

T: She left everything behind. She just get her kids, and then put everybody in the boat, and then you know, came to Tha Khaek.

A: Okay. Is her village on the river?

T: Yah, next to the river.

A: So what year did the Communist come to the village?

T: No, she doesn't remember.

A: Do you remember how, like one of her kids was a certain age, or?

T: She has four kids during that time.

A: At that time, okay.

T: Yah, at that time.

A: And does she remember what year they were born?

T: At that time they were hiding you know one of her kids fell in the water. So she had to grab her out, or otherwise she was going to die.

A: Otherwise going to drown?

T: Drown yah. She just remembers that at that time she had four kids. She does not remember the year.

A: She doesn't know what year her kids were born?

T: She doesn't remember all of her kids birthdays. Only her husband wrote it down, and then the kids remember it. It's only her husband wrote down her kids birthday. And then when they grow up he gave them the date, and then they remember their own birth date.

A: So was her village on the river?

T: Yes, you asked her that already.

A: You didn't give me an answer. So I didn't hear it. [Chuckles]

T: Yes, but it's not Mekong River though. It's [Num] Hinboun.

A: That's the name of the river?

T: Right. That's the name of the river, Hinboun.

A: All right. So how did the Communist come into the village? Did they shoot, or did they just walk in with their rifles, or were they trying to convince people of their cause?

T: They were not shooting anybody. They were just walking. She said in her village they have like teachers, you know, police, people in the village. And then after the war everybody leave that village.

A: Okay.

T: You know, the teachers, the police.

A: So when the Communist first came in were they friendly? Were they trying to convince people of their cause?

T: No, they didn't. They just walk in and stayed at the village. They stayed in the people's house.

A: Did they stay in your house?

T: Yah, they stayed in her house. Okay. She said when the soldier, the Laos soldier that came to the river, people are still there and she still live there. Then after the Vietnamese soldier came to the village, and then they left the village.

A: Okay. So when the Laos Communist came they stayed where they were (T: Right), and they stayed in the people's houses. (T: Right) But then when the Vietnamese Communist came in they got (--)

T: Then the people left the village.

A: Okay. So were you scared when the Laos Communist came?

T: Yes, she's afraid. She was afraid. Oh, and because, and she has a daughter and the soldiers go like you know, play, visit her daughter. So she's afraid of the soldiers too.

A: And how old was your daughter at that time? Was she a young woman?

T: Sixteen, or seventeen. That's her first, first daughter. And then the soldiers liked her.

A: But nothing happened to them?

T: No, nothing happened.

A: So how long did, how long did they stay at your house? Or how long did they stay in the village?

T: You mean the Laos?

A: The Laos Communist.

T: It's about a month. They stayed at the house about a month.

A: And then why did they leave when the Vietnamese came?

T: She doesn't know why the Laos soldier left before the Vietnamese soldier came.

A: Oh, the Laos (--)

T: She said when the Laos soldiers left, and then the Vietnamese soldiers came, and then when they would go like the north part of the village. And after a little bit later she heard the gun. There was some kind of fighting or something.

A: Okay, between?

T: Between the Vietnamese and the Laos Communist soldier.

A: Between the Vietnamese Communist, and the Laos Communist?

T: Yah, she just assumed that it's the Vietnamese and then the Laos Communist. And then they just packed their stuff and go hiding in the, you know.

A: Oh, in the jungle.

T: Jungle, and what they call that thing, you have to dig a hole and you go hide in there?

A: Like a foxhole?

T: Yah.

A: I don't know. A cave?

T: Yah, it's like a cave.

A: Okay. And her husband went with them? They stayed together?

T: Yes, he went with them.

A: Did you know any of the Laos Communist soldiers? Were there people that you knew from that village, or other villages close by?

T: No, she doesn't know any.

A: So when you heard the fighting in the northern part of the village you guys decided to leave?

T: When they heard the gun they went to hide in the cave.

A: Okay. And did they bring food with them?

T: And the plane was bombing too.

A: Oh the plane was bombing?

T: Yah, the plane was bombing too. And they were shaking when they were in the cave. Yah, they brought food like rice. And then they had to be careful when they cook, you know, because they don't want the see, the plane see the fire or the smoke so that they would know where they hide. So they don't drop a bomb on them.

A: Now who was dropping the bombs?

T: She doesn't know who.

A: Probably the Americans?

T: No.

A: Okay. And how close were the bombs to where you guys were?

T: She said after she moved to Tha Khaek American people go help them, and bring them food. American people, they're dropping the food for them at Tha Khaek. When they were dropping the bombs she can feel that her house shaking, and that they have to like you know, put their heads down, stuff like that. It's a big hole, you know, the bomb.

A: This is before they went into the cave?

T: During the war, I mean at that time.

A: Okay.

T: And then the trees and everything, you know, fly out and then there's a big hole after the bomb dropped.

A: So how close from her house?

T: It's very close, close to her house. They didn't bomb at her village, but there's another village that's next to her village, they were bombed. And the house was on fire and the people die.

A: Um, what was the name of that village?

T: Ban Nakang, that's the name of the village.

A: Ban Nakang?

T: Nakang. (A: Nakang?) Nakang.

A: Um, did you know anybody that was killed in the bombing?

T: She forgot their names.

A: But were they friends or family?

T: No, no, they live in different village. She can see the smoke from her village. She saw the plane fly back and forth. She went down at the river, you know, at the shore and was praying.

A: She went down to the river and prayed?

T: Pray, yah. And then people call her to go to the temple. And they were hiding in the temple too.

A: Okay. So let me just get the chronology straight. When this bombing was taking place, was that before they went to the cave, or after?

T: They went back and forth in the cave, and she doesn't remember what.

A: So when the bombing came that's when they would run over to the cave?

T: Yes, they went to hide in the cave and then when they, when they didn't hear any bombs, and then they came out. And then when they hear the bomb again, and then they went in to the cave again, back and forth.

A: And was there a name for this cave?

T: [Tum Paqua] There's two caves that they went to hide in. [Tum Way Khun.] (A: Is what?) That's the name of the cave.

A: That's the name of the cave.

T: Yes, Tum is a cave.

A: Okay. And how big was it? How many people would be able to fit in there?

T: A lot. A lot of people can come. It's a big cave.

A: Really? So like her, most of her village went there, or even other villages?

T: All her village.

A: All of her village.

T: Other village, they go to other cave, because they have a lot of caves. So she said the women sleep in the cave, but the men have to come sleep you know, at the (A: Entrance?) entrance of the cave. And then they, at night time the tigers walk around the cave.

A: Really?

T: And the cave, the tiger didn't bite any, nor eat anybody. [Chuckles] And you know, she said after they left the cave, about ten, twenty kids die.

A: Why? What did she say?

T: It was difficult for them to live over there, you know. It's hard, a hard life. That's why they have to, we have to escape from Laos.

A: So how did the kids die, the twenty kids?

T: She believe that that place is you know, it has the spiritual things in there. You know, then people go over there to disturb it. And that's why they make the kids you know, die.

A: Oh. So like the kids became ill after?

T: Umhm, yup.

A: How old were the kids? Young kids or all ages?

T: And her mother passed away at that time too. Oh, two or three years old.

A: Um, wow.

T: And after they left the cave and her mother became ill, and then she passed away too. And then they were poor, you know, at that time. They couldn't do anything. They just wrap her in you know, that thing you put on the floor.

A: The mat?

T: The mat thing and they just go bury her in that.

A: Not a proper burial?

T: Not a proper way to do it. And then because they're afraid of the bombing too. So they have to be careful. Before she's going to move to Tha Khaek, at her old village because she did the farming, the rice farm, and she had you know, harvest a lot of rice, and then they have to leave the rice behind.

A: So they weren't able to do the harvesting before they left?

T: No, they harvest the rice already, and they bring the rice home, and then put in you know, in a room, in the house somewhere. And then they had to leave, left that behind.

A: So they (--)

T: Then she moved to Ban [Tanar], that's the name of the village.

A: Okay, she move to (--)

T: Do the rice farming at Ban [Tanar]. First she moved to Ban [Tanar], and then she do rice farming there. And then other people, they heard that American come and help them, give them food. And then they had to move to Hinboun.

A: So how long did (--) Oh, one question. How old was her mother when she died?

T: Sixty years old. Her mother was sixty years old when she passed away.

A: And how long was the period when they were going back and forth between the cave and the village during the bombing? How long was that time period?

T: It's about a year.

A: Wow!

T: Yah, it's about a year.

A: Wow. What was the longest period they stayed in the cave?

T: It's about a month, or two months. That's the longest time they stayed in the cave.

A: So what made you decide to finally leave your original village to go to the other village?

T: Because of the war.

A: They just made a decision.

T: Yes, they made the decision. Because the soldiers came to the village, and the soldiers said, "If you don't want to die, leave the village."

A: Who said that?

T: The soldiers.

A: Which soldiers? The King?

T: She just know they're soldiers.

A: She doesn't know which side?

T: She doesn't know which.

A: It's probably the Royal side.

T: She doesn't know which soldiers.

A: Did those soldiers escort them to the next village?

T: No, there were no soldiers escorting them. They have to like hide, or very careful, you know, to escape from that (--)

A: Really?

T: She said that at the south part of her village there's Laos soldiers over there. If people go there they're not going to do anything unless the Vietnamese soldiers go, and then there will be a fight. (A: Okay.) And the soldiers stay in like section, you know.

A: So ask her, were the soldiers that were in the southern part of the village the same soldiers that told them to leave?

T: No, the soldiers at the village told them. A lot, they have a lot of soldiers.

A: [Unclear]

T: She doesn't remember a whole (--) I mean she doesn't know (A: Which side?) which side, what, where they come from.

A: Okay. So at that time you, when she said you had to be careful when you escaped, what did she mean by that?

T: They were afraid. They were afraid that they were going to get killed or something, so they had to escape.

A: And this is when they went in the boat?

T: Yah. They had a small boat. You know, like the boat (--)

A: The water festival kind of boat?

T: The water festival, yah, that kind.

A: Where did they get the boat?

T: Their own boat, because they live, you know, next to the river. So they had the boat.

A: So when you got to the next village where did you guys live?

T: Ban [Tanar].

A: Yah, but did they have a house there, or did they know people?

T: Yah, they had to build a new house and live there. They moved to Ban [Tanar] and they built a house, and do the rice farming, you know, farm there for a year. And then they moved to Ban Hinboun.

A: Was there any fighting at the second village that you lived at?

T: No, there was no (--)

A: And what about the next place?

T: No.

A: And how long did you stay there in Hinboun?

T: About twenty years now.

A: Until she came here?

T: Yes. Yes.

A: Any changes to you or your family after the Communist government took over in 1975?

T: No, after they moved to Ban [Tanar] and then moved to Ban Hinboun, and then they build a house and they live there.

A: And no problems after that with the war, or anything?

T: Oh, she said that the soldier came to Ban Hinboun too. And then they have to go live in (--) She doesn't remember exactly how long ago. She said that after they moved to Hinboun, and then all the people that moved with her to the village, they built a house, they lived there for awhile, and then until there's no more war. And then those people, other people, they moved back to their old village, except her, she stayed at the village, at the new house, place.

A: And she said (--) Now the reason she moved from the second village to Hinboun was because they heard that there was food available?

T: Yes, because the American people go over there to help them with food.

A: Yah. And then what about, she said about he soldiers coming to move them again?

T: Yah, the soldiers went to, to that, the new village that she moved to (A: In Hinboun?), Hinboun, yes, and then she moved to [Saravan] for a year, and then she moved back to Ban Hinboun.

A: And then she moved to Tha Khaek?

T: No, Tha Khaek is where she goes shopping and buys her food and stuff.

A: Okay. All right.

T: Just the market over there.

A: So, so when they were in Hinboun what did the soldiers tell them that they had to move to the other place?

T: No, the soldiers didn't tell them to move. Her daughter just want her to move, go live with her in Saravan.

A: Okay. All right. And so what brought you to Lowell?

T: Her children told her to come to visit them. And then when she came over here then they didn't want her to leave to go back to Laos. She thought that she would just come to visit them and then go back to Laos, but when she came over here, then her kids didn't want her to go back.

A: [Chuckles] Does she (--)

T: And her little son wants to come with her too. And then she told him that she's going back. So that's why she didn't want him to come with her.

A: So they want her to watch the grandkids or something?

T: Over there?

A: She's a prisoner.

T: No, she doesn't have to baby sit or anything.

A: How do you like Lowell?

T: She likes Lowell. She first arrived in Lowell and then she went to live in Texas for awhile, because her son live over there. And then she moved back over here with her son. Her son, the one that she lives with, sponsored her.

A: What year did she come to Lowell first time?

T: She doesn't remember what year she came, but she came here for over ten years.

A: Okay.

T: That's her son in Texas. [Shows them a photo] (A: Okay) My sister-in-law. He was a soldier in Laos. (A: Who?) Her son. (A: Her son?) The one that lives in Texas.

A: Oh really? (T: Yah) Did he have to escape when the Communist took over?

T: Both of her sons, that one and the one that live in Texas, they lived in Tha Khaek. They moved there before, before the war. They went to [unclear] to school. [Ali is taking photos of Chanhma]

A: Any final stories that you want to share?

T: No. Nothing. [Laughs]

A: Okay. Kop Chia. Kop Chai. Kop Chai. Thank you very much.

Interview ends